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Bates, C. Conviviality, disability and design in the city, *The Sociological Review, Special Issue: Streetlife: The Shifting Sociologies of the Street*. Forthcoming 2018. Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

Current writings on the city are introducing new perspectives on streetlife that focus less on spaces of division, exclusion and fear, and instead celebrate the places in which contemporary urban life comes together. As Gill Valentine writes, ‘After a decade or so in which the city was characterized as a site of crime, conflict and withdrawal... the city of the twenty-first century is being reimagined as a site of connection’ (2008: 324). London, as a ‘world city of convivial multiculture’ (Back and Sinha, 2016), is an often-cited example, in which urban life and the ‘being together of strangers’ (Young, 1990: 237) is performed in cafes (Hall, 2012; Jones et al., 2015), parks (Neal et al., 2015), school playgrounds (Neal et al., 2016), shopping malls (Rhys-Taylor, 2017), swimming ponds (Watson, 2006), and children’s centres (Wessendorf, 2016). Celebrating the city as a place of living together, these studies show how, through the accumulation of everyday encounters with difference, certain spaces emerge as convivial places, or ‘cosmopolitan canopies’ (Anderson, 2004).

What is unique about these studies is not only the insight that they provide into the social relations, exchanges, and sensibilities that make convivial culture, but also their emphasis on the spatial form and vital materiality of convivial places. By illuminating the material infrastructure of urban life – the ‘built-in equipment’ that allows strangers to dwell together (Jacobs, 1961: 72) – they suggest that relationships of difference are both designed and lived in cities (Tonkiss, 2013: 89). As the editors of this special issue point out, the street has long been an important site for studies of social life, yet there has been relatively little work that brings the material context of the street into focus in order to understand streetlife and to think about the city (see Amin, 2008; Koch and Latham, 2012; Watson, 2006; Wise and Velayutham, 2014).

The kind of conviviality that is being recognised here emerges from Paul Gilroy’s work. Gilroy offers a way of understanding conviviality through the everyday processes of cohabitation and interaction that make urban multiculture ordinary (2004: xi), while also recognising that conviviality does not erase division and fear, but happens in the midst of

social damage, inequalities and exclusions (Back and Sinha, 2016). As such, convivial ‘rubbing along’ (Watson, 2006) includes moments of warmth, togetherness and belonging, but also involves negotiation, friction and conflict (Wise and Noble, 2016: 425). These moments can be understood as social, spatial, and material, as Amanda Wise and Selvaraj Velayutham point out, ‘conviviality is more than the interpersonal... there are material, structural and spatial dimensions that interplay’ (2014: 408).

While cosmopolitan spaces of difference and diversity are beginning to be uncovered in likely and unlikely locations by sociologists, accounts of public space in London also, and more often, describe the capital as a city made up of hostile, exclusionary and privatised zones. As Anna Minton writes, ‘defensible architecture’¹, which ‘discourages strangers and diversity, has become the template for all new development’ (2012: 143). Examples of such hostile architecture include the installation of ‘anti-homeless’ spikes outside flats and supermarkets, the use of ‘poor doors’ to segregate low-income from wealthy residents, and the development of privately owned public spaces or ‘Pops’ (Garrett, 2015). As architecture and design critic Edwin Heathcote (2007) observes, ‘The fountains are filled with chlorine, the squares are patrolled by security guards, the sculptural light fittings are spiked with CCTV cameras, signs forbid skateboarding and rollerblading. Most of these spaces are public in appearance only.’

The call for city spaces to be open and inclusive, and the assertion of our ‘rights to the city’ (Lefebvre, 1996) that has resounded in response to the current wave of development resonates deeply with disability scholarship, in which it has long been recognised that the city is not, and has never been, equally accessible to all. Instead, barriers to urban life are both a universal and an everyday experience, tainted by struggles with the physical environment as well as with societal attitudes and other people. One solution to our current situation may lie in alternative design discourses such as inclusive design, which aims to ‘make places that reflect the diversity of people who want to use them’ (Design Council Cabi). Inclusive design, also known as design for all and universal design in different parts of the world, has gradually developed over the years, from its roots in the disability rights movement to a broader (and more inclusive) social agenda that aims towards ‘....*design for human diversity, social inclusion, and equality*’ (Design for All Europe, 2008, emphasis in original) and that considers, along with disabled people, ethnic minorities, low-income populations, the

LGBTQ community, and women. As such, I want to suggest that inclusive design might be imagined as a vision of convivial culture in which we live together with difference.

To illustrate, this paper takes as an example the redevelopment of a small urban square in London, designed by landscape architects Gustafson Porter and completed in 2011. Gustafson Porter strives to design barrier-free environments that ‘promote choice, flexibility of use and enable everyone to participate equally’ (Gustafson Porter website). Weaving together observations and insights from site walks, interviews, ethnographic observations, and online research gathered over two years, the paper considers how design and everyday life intertwine to make convivial places, but also pauses to take in the moments when tensions rise and conviviality fails. The paper consists of two sections. The first section, ‘the materiality of conviviality’ introduces the neighbourhood and takes in the spatial design of the new square, relating how its features support particular people and activities. The second section, ‘social encounters and convivial sensibilities’ digs deeper into the everyday social encounters that happen there, in order to consider how inclusion and exclusion operate in a public space like General Gordon Square, and reflect on the challenges of making and maintaining conviviality. Throughout, I draw on the classic urban design theorists Jane Jacobs and William H. Whyte, whose writings connect with contemporary understandings of inclusive design and cosmopolitan life. Both Jacobs and Whyte drew attention to the positive aspects of streetlife and recognised the importance of small urban spaces, and both offer useful lessons on observing public space and what Jacobs’ named ‘sidewalk ballets’, the movements of neighbours and passers-by that make a city space enjoyable and friendly. In conclusion, I argue for an extended idea of convivial culture (Gilroy, 2004), which gives a name not only to our multicultural modes of co-existence but also acknowledges the ways in which we live together with other ordinary differences, namely illness and disability.



General Gordon Square, 2012. Image by Chris Mansfield (chrismansfieldphotos.com).

The materiality of conviviality

Woolwich was once the heart of the British empire's military-industrial complex. Post mid-century many local industries closed down; The Royal Arsenal factory, which closed in 1967, had employed 100,000 people at its peak. From the mid-century through to the new millennium, the area became a run-down and deprived part of the capital. The British National Party was active locally in the 90's and the area witnessed a series of racist attacks, including the murders of Rolan Adams on 15 February 1991, Rohit Duggal on 15 July 1992, and Stephen Lawrence on 22 April 1993. In more recent years Woolwich's reputation has been compounded by the riots of 2011 and the murder of soldier Lee Rigby on 22 May 2013, an event that provoked debates in the media about immigration, multiculturalism and the place of Muslim minorities in post-secular Britain (Smith and Holmwood, 2013).

Corporate and council investment is now beginning to transform Woolwich, and new and planned housing and transport developments are making it a relatively affordable and desirable place to live. In 2012 Woolwich Central, a development of 960 homes and a Tesco superstore was completed, and in 2018 a Crossrail station will open, creating new and faster transport links to the city, Heathrow airport, and other parts of the world. At the nearby

Woolwich Arsenal development, luxury waterfront apartments have replaced old council estates and derelict land, and signs of gentrification are visible with new coffee shops, cafes and restaurants opening in the area. A report from the Royal Borough of Greenwich indicates that the Woolwich Riverside ward has experienced a population increase of 50% between 2001-2011. New communities have also rapidly emerged, as immigrants from Nigeria, Ghana, Nepal, and Eastern Europe have settled in the area. These spatial, social and cultural changes are re-making Woolwich, and while its other histories have not yet been completely erased by regeneration, they are beginning to fade from the collective memory.

The transformation of General Gordon Square² is one small part of this regeneration masterplan. The design concept, to completely remodel the existing square and create a unified space that would transmute a derelict place into a vibrant hub of multicultural life, was realised by Gustafson Porter in 2011. In some respects, the regeneration of Woolwich is a ‘good news’ story in which the contradictory and tension-laden nature of urban development is glazed over (Imrie and Lees, 2014: xii). As Kristine Miller observes, the results of development do not necessarily benefit the people who live there; we live in a society in which a few landowners profit from increases in land value while existing residents face rising rents or are priced out (2007: xiv). Yet, I want to argue, General Gordon Square plays a vital role in sustaining people and the place in which they live (see also Bates, 2017; Bynon and Rishbeth, 2015).

I made my first visit to General Gordon Square in Woolwich, south east London, in August 2014, at a time when the installation of ‘anti-homeless’ spikes outside flats and supermarkets became the source of public outrage and media attention, and the use of ‘poor doors’ segregating low-income from wealthy residents was widely reported in the media. These extracts from contemporary city life resonated with the opening lines of William H. Whyte’s classic text, *City*, (which I was reading at the time) in which he observes, ‘The city is full of vexations: steps too steep; doors too tough to open; ledges you cannot sit on because they are too high or too low, or have spikes on them so that undesirables will not sit on them. It is difficult to design an urban space so maladroitly that people will not use it, but there are many such spaces’ (1988: 1). In stark contrast, General Gordon Square stood out as a rare example of inclusive design in the city, a project that aimed to transmute a derelict space, frequented only by street drinkers and cat-sized rodents, into a vibrant hub of multicultural life.

Walking through the new square with the project architect on that warm and sunny August afternoon, I felt the free mingling of strangers and sensed a culture of conviviality, civic regard and cohabitation. No longer a space to be avoided or of anti-social loitering, General Gordon Square had become a hive of relaxed and lively social activity. Mothers were feeding babies, young people were skateboarding, and people passed through, sat alone or chatted in groups while generally enjoying the ambience. As we walked and talked together, the project architect explained how the design has altered the way the space works and is used today. A road on one side of the square has completely disappeared and another is closed to traffic during the day, so that the square is now eased from traffic and linked with the shopping street by a shared surface, prioritising pedestrian use. There is clear visibility through the square, making the space feel safer and connecting it with the surrounding area, while dense planting near the bus stops creates a barrier to the busy road route and reduces the sound of traffic. Long stone benches provide a choice of places to sit, pause and rest, alone or in groups, and lavender and sarcococca scent the air.

Replacing the old traditional park fountain, a new water feature attracts families and children to the square. ‘Water should be accessible, touchable, splashable’ (1980: 49) remarked Whyte, and this is exactly what the water in General Gordon Square, known locally as ‘Woolwich Beach’, is. Gustafson Porter are specialists in water features, and are famous for designing the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fountain in Hyde Park, London. In Woolwich, the water animates the square. Children run and splash, cooling down in the hot summer months. It is a trick of the eye that the water appears to run into the pavement and out the other side (in reality, the water is taken away and filtered on two separate loops), but children often put sticks in and wonder why they do not appear at the other side. The activity around the water is palpable evidence of the new ambience, as the project architect pointed out, ‘Prior to the square being redeveloped, I don’t think a parent would have been comfortable letting their child run around here.’



Children run and splash, cooling down in the hot summer months. Image by the author.

The sitting spaces also animate the new space, providing a range of options for people to stop and watch the world go by. In *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Whyte observes that ‘the most popular plazas tend to have considerably more sitting space than the less well-used ones.’ (1980: 27). As he elaborates, ‘Choice should be built into the basic design. Even though benches and chairs can be added, the best course is to maximize the sittability of inherent features’ (1980: 28). To which he adds, ‘Most ledges are inherently sittable, but with a little ingenuity and additional expense they can be made unsittable’ (1980: 29). The sitting space in General Gordon Square has been designed with precisely these ideals. The square’s terraces (which gradiate the slope of the ground) are designed at bench height (350-450mm), making their ledges inherently sittable – when I asked the project architect if they had been designed for this purpose he replied, ‘If you didn’t intend people to sit on the ledges it would be a crying shame.’ On the day we visit the ledges are fully utilised. There are more traditional sitting options too – a long stone bench runs along the two back edges of the square, a place where people naturally gravitate too. The bench is designed to be both physically and socially comfortable, from the way it kicks back at a relaxed 99 degree angle to the dual height, which means that people can sit at two levels and converse between

perching and standing (this also preserved the soil height so that existing trees could be kept). Extra arm elements provide support for people who need something to lift up from, and enable groups to sit in spaces for small and large gatherings – as Radhika Bynon and Clare Rishbeth (2015) point out, there are precedents for the intentional design of long benches to encourage positive social interactions and social inclusion. Yet benches are increasingly associated with attracting ‘antisocial behaviour’ and have begun to be removed from many city spaces, or else made deliberately uncomfortable to dissuade their use, another example of hostile architecture (Bynon and Rishbeth, 2015; see also Bates et al., 2017).



Sitting and skateboarding in General Gordon Square. Image by the author.

The times of day and the season also affect how people feel about the square, in terms of safety and the desire to spend time outside. The next time I visit the square is on a late November afternoon, and it is overcast and chilly. A large Christmas tree now stands on one side of the square, cordoned off with ramshackle wooden posts and red and white tape. As the sky darkens, the red and white lights adorning the tree in vertical lines are switched on. The grass looks worn and muddy in patches, and the square feels empty compared to my last

visit, although there is still a steady flow of pedestrian traffic and two large groups are gathered on the bench. Two stalls also inhabit the space. Greenwich Sexual Health has a small table and display on one side, and a large, hot pink Avon bus occupies the corner of the square near the water. They are recruiting, and large speakers outside the bus are pumping hard, modern music into the atmosphere. The water feature has not yet been drained for the winter, and several pieces of litter float in it – a Stella can, a glass ginger ale bottle, and some cigarette butts. Two fluorescent-coated community officers patrol the square, before handing over to two more, a man in an electric wheelchair glides along the centre path, then four children run through the water on their way home from school despite the weather. I sit in the cold air waiting to meet an interview participant, watching this little street ballet unfold while thinking about the efficacy of the no public drinking rule (against the visual evidence of drinking floating in front of me) and wondering if the local crime rate has gone down or if people just feel safer in the new space because it is well used (with reference to Wilson and Kelling's (1982) report *Broken Windows*³ and Jane Jacobs' observations about 'eyes on the street').

Social encounters and convivial sensibilities

Having described the spatial form of the new square, I want to turn now to the everyday social encounters that happen there. Woolwich has a highly diverse population and the square attracts many different people, including different minority and marginalised social groups. Individuals, families and communities pass through and gather in the square throughout the day, mixing and mingling as they go about their daily activities, some making their way to public transport hubs and on to other places, others hanging out in the square for much of the day. The popularity of the space today suggests that the regeneration of General Gordon Square has played an important role in making Woolwich a more inclusive, safe and multicultural neighbourhood, and a live example of convivial culture. The square is a success story for many groups of people, from the Nepalese women who regularly meet there, to the children who have a new place to play, and the disabled people whose access to the town centre has been vastly improved. But the question of who is included or excluded from this place, and how inclusion and exclusion operate in a public space like General Gordon Square, reveal the challenges of making and maintaining conviviality.

For some people, the visible diversity of General Gordon Square is one of the most

remarkable aspects of the new space. This diversity is multilayered, and works to make the square feel convivial on different levels. As Fran Tonkiss notes, having a diversity of different users in a space results in well-used spaces and ‘a sense of security in the common spaces of the city’ (2013: 53-4). Her point resonates with Jacobs’ observations about ‘eyes on the street’ – a sense of safety derived from the presence of others. On one level, the diversity of users makes the square an attractive and friendly place to be, simply because instead of being colonised by one group, or left derelict, it is inhabited by many different people.

On another level, the visible, and specifically multicultural, diversity that is evident in General Gordon Square creates a feeling that difference is accepted there. As Arun⁴, an Asian British resident in his 40s, commented during an interview:

I really appreciate that difference is okay here, you don’t really stand out and that’s quite nice. I grew up in an area where my difference stood out and I was constantly aware of that. I’m not really aware of my difference here, which is really nice.
(Interview, August 2016)

Arun grew up in a predominantly white town in the North of England, and his family experienced racist abuse throughout his childhood. He has lived in India for a short time, as well as in other London neighbourhoods, and is aware of Woolwich’s history of racism. But he describes present-day Woolwich as a friendly and multicultural place, in which he feels remarkably comfortable. By creating a distinctly multicultural urban buzz in the centre of town the square plays an important part in making many different people feel at home, as Arun described:

It feels nice for me to have lots of people around. One of the things I really missed when I was living in India and moved back to England was that you’d walk in the street at a particular time and there’d be hardly anyone around, just a massive contrast to when you’re in India and you walk in the street, there are hundreds of people around. And then moving to Woolwich eventually, I really enjoyed that in the square there’s always lots of people around, unless it’s raining, and I love seeing the kids play around there, I love seeing people having a few beers in there and feeling free, yes I really enjoy that. (Interview, August 2016)

Similarly, Ann, a White British resident in her 50's, commented:

I observe lots of different groups sitting here. I love to see people enjoying themselves and having their community in a nice public space, it probably shows a lack of community centres and I think that the square has become a kind of community centre, which is nice. (Interview, August 2016)

The enjoyment of other people that Arun and Ann speak of begins to unravel what is at stake here. Arun enjoys how the square brings many different people together and Ann describes the square as a community centre – both speak of living together with difference. While proximity on its own is not enough to bring about social transformation (Amin, 2002), or as Tonkiss argues, 'spatial 'exposure' does not equate in any simple way to social encounter' (2013: 77), simply observing difference in the square can make people feel at home there, engendering a greater awareness of difference while at the same time making difference normal and unremarkable. This description resonates with Susanne Wessendorf's (2016) account of Hackney, a super-diverse London Borough where the fact that 'everyone is a little bit different' makes recent migrants feel a sense of belonging, comfort and fit.

Elijah Anderson describes in vivid detail how 'cosmopolitan canopies', such as Philadelphia's Reading Terminal Market, a busy, quasi-public setting, provide an opportunity for diverse strangers to be exposed, mix and observe one another. As Anderson suggests, 'If nothing more, through constant exposure, such environments can encourage common, everyday taken-for-granted civility toward others who are different from oneself' (2004: 29). His words resonate with Paul Gilroy's description of how, through mundane cosmopolitan encounters, 'the strangeness or strangers goes out of focus and other dimensions of a basic sameness can be acknowledged and made significant' (2004: 3). The act of sharing a public space such as a park or plaza, where people come together in their mutual affinity for the place itself, can also create 'a connection to others without interaction' (Neal et al., 2015: 473) that is more powerful than simply passing people by on the street. These possibilities contrast with defensible, privately owned public spaces, where 'people become unaccustomed to – and eventually very frightened of – difference' (Minton, 2012: 36).

At the same time, it must be recognised that not all residents may be as convivial in their regard as Arun and Ann. There are still moments of hostility in the square, and times when it

feels less than welcoming, suggesting that there are temporal dimensions to conviviality. Many of the people I spoke with said they would not enter the square in the evening. As Les Back observes, 'The quality of the cityscape is transformed by night and day and these time geographies have different consequences for men and women and young and old.' (2007: 66). While the square is now well lit with lighting columns and low-level lighting under the benches and in the sidewalls, a fear of public space after dark persists. This is not, specifically, a local problem, but speaks of a widespread fear of the city at night and an unsubstantiated fear of crime in Britain (Minton, 2012: 131).

There are also powers at work that control what can happen, and who can be present, in the square. In her study of New York's public spaces, Kristine Miller observes, 'public life is not spontaneous. It is bound by regulation and codes of conduct. These codes and regulations not only control what can happen on the streets and sidewalks, plazas and parks, but also who can be present there' (2007: x). Who constitutes the public of General Gordon Square is similarly controlled. For example, while street drinking has been clearly visible in the square for some time, a series of anti-social public drinking bans have been enforced in an attempt to move the street drinkers out of the square. These bans are intended to make the square a safer and more appealing place to other residents, but they also exclude those people who are already marginalised from other places and may be most in need of access to public space.

An ongoing tension also exists between some residents and the skaters who visit the square. As Lia Karsten and Eva Pel point out in their explorative study of skateboarding in Amsterdam. 'Skateboarders, roller bladers, or roller skaters exploring the city have become a familiar sight in the contemporary urban landscape. They are the subject of amusement but also the source of some annoyance. The way in which skaters use the city is essentially different from that of the rest of its inhabitants and visitors. Their 'cool' attitude and ingenious acrobatics catch the eye and form a new kind of urban entertainment. However, the alternative use of space also leads to conflict in a number of ways' (2000: 327-8).

While there is a skatepark nearby, General Gordon Square has become a popular place for young people to practice skateboarding and hang out together. Described as 'Woolwich's new skateboard paradise' in an online blog, its smooth surfaces and bright lighting contrast with the poor state of the local skatepark, which is dark, derelict and unsafe. The move is a response to a local problem, but the appropriation of the square also fits with a wider trend

that has seen skateboarding shift from the hidden suburbs of cities worldwide to more visible, inner city areas and public plazas like General Gordon Square, which offer skateboarders ‘a plethora of building types, social relations, times, and spaces, many of which do not necessarily require money to access or at least visit them.’ (Borden, 2002: 181). As Iain Borden writes, ‘skateboarders take over space conceptually as well as physically,’ (2002: 194), and the presence of skaters has sparked debate about what constitutes an appropriate and acceptable activity in the square, with some residents enjoying the entertainment and others feeling threatened by it. Attempts have since been made to zone the skaters, restricting their movements to a small area of the square. One suggestion made at a community group meeting, for ‘adult skateboard lessons so all can join in at General Gordon Square’ captures something of the situation. Yet it needs to be acknowledged that these young people feel safer skating in the square than they would in other parts of the city, and while their activity is construed as anti-social behaviour by some it can also be understood as contributing to the convivial atmosphere of the square, especially in the evenings when the space might otherwise feel less active and more dangerous. As Borden observes, skateboarding can be understood as a critical practice that challenges ‘both the form and the political mechanics of urban life’, and that ‘suggests that pleasure rather than work, use values rather than exchange values, activity rather than passivity are potential components of the future, as yet unknown city’ (2002: 180).

The wide pathways and smooth surfaces that attract the skaters to the square have also greatly improved disabled peoples’ access to the town centre, and people in powered wheelchairs now frequently pass through. Just as the square feels like a convivial place because of the many different people that can be seen, the increased presence of disabled people may, as Ruth Butler and Sophia Bowlby (1997: 412) suggest, stimulate positive social attitudes and foster awareness and acceptance of disability. At the same time, like other groups and individuals whose rights to inhabit the square are at times contested, reactions to disability in public can still be challenging. Butler and Bowlby observe that disabled people are often barely visible in public space, and common reactions to their appearance are hostility or pity (1997: 420). While decades of campaigning and education have helped to raise awareness, their observation holds true. Arthur, a White British resident in his 60’s and a manual wheelchair user, illustrates this point:

I’m generally passing through. The trouble is I’ve been mistaken for someone

begging. I was just sitting at the side waiting, and someone tried to give me some money and I just no, no, no. That's probably down to the way I look, although I'm sure I combed my hair by that point! There are a lot of people hanging around, and I am just cautious anyway in public spaces. (Interview, February 2015)

Although Arthur regularly passes through General Gordon square on his way elsewhere, the square does not offer him a social space or a resting place. The discomfort that his presence generates leads to experiences of discrimination in public, and if it were not for the crowded pavements around the square where people wait for buses, which makes it difficult for him to get by, he would be unlikely to enter the square at all.

Alice, a Black British resident in her thirties, also uses a manual wheelchair. Like Arthur, she struggles to negotiate the busy pavements around the square, as she demonstrated in a mobile interview. Once we had safely made our way through the crowds together, with several stops, polite requests, and a lot of patient waiting for people to take notice and make space, Alice commented:

As you just saw when we were walking up from the bus stop, people are oblivious to the fact, because you're lower as well, people are oblivious. When I go out it is sometimes kids running in front or people just not realising, then they do a sudden stop, and then I am trying to break. (Interview, June 2016)

The difficulties of moving within public space mean that Alice goes out far less now than she did three years ago, when she did not rely on her wheelchair. As Rob Imrie and Marion Kumar observe, many disabled peoples' worlds are increasingly 'defined and divided into places of safety and security, that is, the home, as against places of harm and danger, that is, the environment beyond the bounds of the house' (1998: 362). As we talked, Alice also observed that while there were people in powered wheelchairs passing by, and some older people being taken out by friends and relatives, she rarely sees other people in manual wheelchairs out by themselves. Although we met in the square, it is not a place that she would choose to visit alone. In her manual wheelchair, she struggles with the gradients in the square (south east London is relatively hilly, and while the architects made considerable efforts to smooth out the terrain and make the square step-free, they were unable to make it flat), and disabled parking is too limited. Instead, she prefers less crowded, quieter places,

where she also knows she can easily park her car nearby.

Each of these examples illustrates how mixing and mingling in busy urban spaces can create moments of conviviality among strangers, but also how people and places can sometimes fall short of the cosmopolitan imaginary. In these instances, inclusive places can quickly become hostile, showing that inclusion and exclusion are shifting conditions that depend on both material and social factors. Finally, what makes a place feel convivial to one person may not work for another, Arun enjoys the busy urban buzz in the square while Alice seeks quieter places, for example. And while the square is a success story for many, there are others who feel that it has done little for them, as this response to an online forum post I made seeking interview participants highlights:

More space for the drunks to sit and pretend to watch the TV, and the kids to jump in the water feature, and the big kids to use as a skateboard park in the evenings. I can't think of one thing it has done for me as a disabled person. What is meant by Woolwich being an inclusive neighbourhood? It's the same as always. (February 2015)

As Ash Amin writes, the dynamics of mingling in public space are far from predictable, and 'Some people might come to develop solidarity with others as well as with the city through such engagement, while others will not, depending on background, disposition, expectations from public space, and response to the commons' (2008: 7).

My last visit to the square was in August 2016, when I teamed up with Greenwich Inclusion Project, a local organisation that aims to promote inclusion and address hate crime, and Greenwich Association of Disabled People, a local disability information and advice service. Together, we were running a pop-up stall in the square, with the aim of creating public conversations about disability and inclusion. The ongoing partnership between these two organisations reflects something of the shared ground between multiculturalism and disability, which I have tried to highlight in this paper. As my last fieldnote highlighted, the square is often used as a space in which to raise awareness, or to market products – recall Greenwich Sexual Health and the Avon bus. On this particular day there were two other stalls in the square, promoting smoking cessation support and road safety awareness. That the space is used in this way resonates with the idea that the square is a kind of community

centre, a place where people can meet to socialise as well as to access support. Seen in this light, the stalls (when they are not marketing products) are a kind of community outreach work. We are in the middle of a heat wave, and have placed our stall along a walkway near the water, where children are enjoying cooling off. The tabletop is adorned with t-shirts, posters, balloons and wristbands, and people stop to ask how much the t-shirts are (they are free, and it is not long before they are gone), while children come for the balloons. Speaking in English is a struggle for several of the people who stop by, but others are keen to engage in conversation for a short while. Two people, a man and a woman, come separately. They identify with our cause, relating to it through their own experiences of others' perceptions and attitudes to their homosexuality. Meanwhile the community officers are patrolling the square, handing out a postcard showing the new dispersal no drinking zone. I soak up the atmosphere, making notes about the people who come and go, and enjoying the opportunity to 'hang out' with key informants. Making my way home later that afternoon I feel heartened by my encounters, and troubled as I reflect on Woolwich's possible futures in the light of further development plans.

Conclusion

Stuart Hall argued that 'the capacity to live with difference is... the coming question of the 21st century' (1993: 361). This paper has explored the cosmopolitan, street-level capacity to live with difference, reflecting on how inclusive design and everyday life intertwine to create convivial moments and places in likely, and unlikely, locations. Despite Woolwich's colonial roots and racist history, General Gordon Square has become known as a convivial place of solidarity and belonging for many different people. Of course, this does not mean that its history has been completely erased. As Paul Gilroy writes, 'conviviality does not describe the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance' (2004: xi). Instead racism and urban multiculturalism paradoxically co-exist (Back and Sinha, 2016), as Arun remarked in an interview, 'Yes it's quite a friendly place, but that doesn't mean unfriendly stuff doesn't happen in there.' Recognising this, I want to suggest that the square is an example of an enchanted but ordinary urban space (Watson, 2006), a place that generates a mixing and mingling, which in turn creates exposure to difference and a recognition of the lives of others.

Today, the square serves many different communities and supports many different activities, and this visible difference contributes to its cosmopolitan and convivial atmosphere. Here, 'to

be ‘different’ is to have something in common’ (Jackson and Jones, 2014: 200). While difference clearly enriches the square, the paper has questioned how far this extends. There are still instances when difference can be perceived as threatening, or simply misunderstood. As Gill Valentine observes, not all urban encounters should be celebrated – there are also instances ‘where contact with difference leaves attitudes and values unmoved, even hardened’ (2008: 325). There are also groups and individuals who, for different reasons, are restricted within or excluded from this public space, or who do not feel at home there, and it needs to be recognised that, to some extent, the square has displaced social problems into other areas. Anna Barker’s reframing of the regulation of public space as ‘mediated conviviality’ (2016) resonates with these street-level issues, and brings into question the relationship between conviviality and urban governance. Despite these tensions, the square offers a vision of convivial culture in which, for the most part, people live together with difference. The value of this public space lies then, not simply in the opportunities that it provides for relaxation and recreation, but in the politics of difference and openness to the other that it offers the city.

Here, inclusive design contributes to a convivial vision of the city by pushing back against the current wave of privatised development and making spaces that allow for the intersection of differences in productive ways. The vital materiality of the square supports relationships through which connection, similarity and difference are encountered and affirmed. Reasserting the importance of open and inclusive space, the square illuminates the role of urban public places in establishing notions of normality and developing a sense of belonging, and provides a live example of convivial culture, in which we live together with all our ordinary differences. It offers a glimpse at how architects might make a difference and of what the future city might look like, but this is not to suggest that conviviality can be ‘designed-in’, or that it is some sort of ‘organic product’ of a particular place (Back and Sinha, 2016: 524). David Harvey’s conception of the city as a dynamic system in which ‘spatial form and social process are in continuous interaction with each other’ (1970: 67) points to the ways in which convivial ‘sensibilities’ (Back and Sinha, 2016), as well as ‘dispositions, habits, spaces and practices’ (Wise and Velayutham, 2014: 408) interplay. The paper is also a momentary account of the life of the square, which will not hold still as development plans progress. To sum up, General Gordon Square illustrates the possibilities, and also some of the limitations, of inclusive design for supporting and encouraging conviviality at street-level.

Notes

¹ Minton is referring here to the work of the American town planner and architect Oscar Newman (1973), who came up with the concept of ‘defensible space’ when looking at ways of reducing crime in public housing in New York.

² The square is named in memorial of British Army officer Major General Charles George Gordon (1833-1885) who was born in Woolwich. While the redesign might have presented an opportunity to move away from the memorialisation of colonialism by renaming the square, the council had no desire to do so (this is not an unusual position for councils to take as the question of selecting a new place name can be contentious). Public consultation events also indicated that the public was predominantly neutral about the name of the square. Some White British locals expressed pride in the name, and even wanted a statue as part of the scheme, however most people did not attach any cultural association to the square and regarded it only as a place name.

³ James Wilson and George Kelling (1982) argued that tolerating disorderliness and minor incivilities, such as window breaking, increases fear and leads to community decline and urban decay. The uptake of Broken Windows policing amongst politicians and police forces in America and Britain in the 1980s and 1990s led to a crackdown on small offences. However recent studies have shown no evidence that this approach to policing cuts crime; instead complaints against police misconduct for policies such as stop-and-search have risen, lowering trust between the police and the community (Minton, 2012: 146).

⁴ All of the participants quoted in this paper have been given a pseudonym (beginning with ‘A’).

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